



Back in the early seventies, rock photographer BOB GRUEN experimented with an exciting new medium – video tape – by shooting an up and coming rock band called THE NEW YORK DOLLS. Thirty years later, the result is the piece-of-history DVD release *ALL DOLLED UP*. BY ERIN FREE

By the early seventies, Bob Gruen was a highly respected rock photographer who'd hung shot the best of the era: Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Blondie, Patti Smith and many more. Gruen was also one of the first to tap into a new filmmaking medium called video, which allowed for instant playback and the ability to shoot hours of footage at an affordable cost. In a fitting slice of serendipity, Gruen's discovery of video collided with his discovery of something else: The New York Dolls. A pack of 14th Street bad boys led by cocksure frontman David Johansson and tough guy guitarist Johnny Thunders, The Dolls donned makeup and flamboyant clothing, put a proto-punk spin on the blues, and played to crowds of hip, liberated young kids from the art scene. In short, they were a rock filmmaker's dream come true.

"It was really more about capturing friends," Gruen explains, his voice a little groggy after a late night out actually seeing the reformed New York Dolls. "When I first got the video machine, it was an experimental new medium. We were using reel-to-reel tape, so you had to carry a 30-pound box on your shoulder with a 10-pound camera in your hand. I used to tape shows for Tina Turner so she could check her dance routines with The Ikettes. When we started doing tapes for The Dolls, it was the same kind of

thing – they could see the show right afterwards, which was unheard of back then."

Gruen hung out with the band backstage and on tour, and filmed a series of their incendiary live performances. The tapes, however, remained in storage. Legal red tape and rights issues – the band had split up, leaving an ugly trail of expensive lawyers and bad vibes in their wake – meant that a release of the material was forever delayed. "Every few years someone would have the idea to sponsor a new release of the material and something would always come up that would nix the deal," Gruen explains. "Somebody wanted too much money or we couldn't reach somebody...it was very frustrating because I've had the footage for a long time and I wanted to get it out."

With the band – or rather, it's only surviving members – reuniting on the behest of noted fan Morrissey to perform at The Meltdown Festival, putting years of animosity behind them (as captured in the documentary *New York Doll – From Rock Star To Rock Bottom And Back*, due for DVD release on May 17), a release of the material finally became possible. For Bob Gruen, that meant a massive trawl through over forty hours of frazzled old videotape. "It brings me right back to that time and place," he explains. "I can smell those rooms, you know? [Laughs] I know all of those people

and everyone's young and healthy again. I know 'em today and they're not exactly like that! [Laughs]"

The band's two survivors – David Johansson and guitarist Sylvain Sylvain – were not on board during editing, but did come in after the DVD footage was assembled to lay down an audio commentary, which brings the whole project full circle. Bob Gruen is just glad that the DVD is out there...for a number of reasons. "I've seen bootlegs on Johnny Thunders that really show him in a bad light," Gruen says of the Dolls guitarist, who became one of the seventies' most notorious junkies before dying of an overdose in 1991. "I remember Johnny as an intelligent, articulate guy who was a lot of fun to be with. I really wanted to get that out there. And, you know, The New York Dolls are a band that everybody's heard of but nobody's seen – this is the only footage that shows who and what they are. This is the only one that shows them walking and talking and I always felt a responsibility and wanted to get it out there. Now that the band have gotten back together, they have a manager that could represent all of them, so we could make a deal and get the rights to do it. It just took thirty years for everybody to simmer down!"

The New York Dolls: All Dolled Up is available now on DVD. ◆

dress for success



The New York Dolls are one of the most influential groups of all time, and according to Bob Gruen, the reasons for that influence aren't too complex...

"They were fun," he says. "Their audience was fun. They made it look like fun and that's why I think they inspired so many people. They didn't make it look like it was hard work where you had to rehearse and get it right. A lot of people have told me that they saw The New York Dolls and had a feeling like 'Well, I could do that'. We knew they were important in a downtown New York sort of way, but we never felt that anybody above 14th Street would recognise it. Their crowd was open to dressing flamboyantly without necessarily worrying about what sexual preference they had. If a guy put on a little makeup and tried to look better, you didn't automatically say that he was a sinner or some kind of sexual deviant. But The Dolls were not part of the gay revolution. They were guys who wanted to be beautiful in order to meet women! They were very hetero, macho guys. They didn't dress like women. No women I knew dressed like that! They may have found one of their shirts or shoes or something in the women's department, but even if they had a dress on – and they never really wore dresses anyway – they weren't wearing a woman's dress, they were wearing a man's dress."